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1,000 children in need of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Miami

Volunteering in decline as January kicks off National Mentoring Month

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By Alex Blencowe*

They are called “Bigs.”

That’s the term given to volunteers who mentor youth through Big Brother Big Sisters of Miami.

The mentees are the “Littles.”

“I started as a Big in school, volunteering,” Big Brothers Big Sisters of Miami President Gale Nelson said, recalling when he introduced himself to his Little's class, doing homework with him, and meeting his teachers. “When I introduced myself as Richard's Big Brother, other little boys in the class said, 'can you get me one too?' And that broke my heart,” he said. Currently, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Miami have about 1,000 children waiting for mentors.



“Miami is such an incredible place with so much culture and so many platforms of mentoring so kids can see life in a whole new way,” said Nelson.

He encourages community members to become mentors not only to change lives, but to also change the statistic of Florida ranking last in number of volunteers per capita, as reported by the Corporation For National and Community Services' survey.

According to the survey, Florida has seen a major and steady decline in number of volunteers since 2011. In 2015, only 19 percent of residents did any kind of volunteering.

However, BBBS has created different ways and programs for mentors to volunteer, including School-To-Work where Nelson started.

Among some of BBBS's partners are hospitals, hotels, schools and companies.



But more importantly, being a Big allowed Nelson to inspire and help a child in need. Roughly 60 percent of kids on the waiting list are males. According to BBBS stats, 85 percent of children in need of mentors live at the poverty line; not to mention only a third of BBBS mentors are male.

He explained that for those kids who joined gangs, especially young Black males, gangs offered a sense of “family and protection” and in a sense, mentorship.

“It's in the wrong way,” Nelson clarified, “but on the surface, it's mentoring; it is a sense that someone has my back.”

He noted that mentorship was not only important for changing the perspectives of kids in need, but also for improving graduation rates, self esteem, motivation, and for exposing kids to corporate environments and their leaders.

“I grew up as a Black male in the inner city, and I needed that positive male role model,” Nelson said. “Mentoring is not just nice, it's necessary.”

According to BBBS communications director, Christina “Kristy” Scott, an obstacle most say interferes with volunteering is transportation in Miami.

BBBS has recently constructed a new hub for resources, classrooms, activities and spaces for media, learning and digital literacy education at its new Carnival Center for Excellence. BBBS has also grown a number of programs like “Bigs In Blue” with police departments, and other partnerships for more flexible opportunities.

“We've listened to what the needs for resources are,” she said. “We're not just serving the students but we're serving our business communities by bringing these programs to them and we're serving the families of Littles by bringing in workshops and partnerships.”

Matches are often chosen very intentionally so that a good match is ensured, said Scott. In addition to a very vigorous interview and background check, and about six weeks of training, mentors are given a stipend to help cover some of the costs of the activities.



“It's just about giving back the knowledge and wisdom of the path you took, and sharing it with someone who's coming up behind you. People forget the next generation are tomorrow's leaders, so it's up to us to mentor them and provide them with guidance on how to be a leader in our community, and why they should care to give back,” she said.

For Big Brothers Big Sisters programs, the minimum requirement is two hours every few weeks, although some assert that mentors will end up spending more time with Littles.

“I think there's a misunderstanding about what the commitment is ... and the perception is that it takes a lot more time than it really needs to,” said Big Brother and global real estate advisor, Scott Voelker.

The time Angelo “Nemo” Dickens spends with his Big, Voelker, is his getaway from a household of women, being a boy raised by his grandmother, aunt and female cousins.

“It's tough sometimes,” Angelo sighed, noting that living with women could be quite aggravating. But when he's with Voelker, Angelo has a mentor and a friend to talk to.

“He's a great guy and a great brother,” said Angelo.

For Voelker, the experience has been nothing short of gratifying and enlightening, especially considering Voelker and Angelo lost their fathers at young ages and have built a relationship based on different connections, since being paired more than a year ago.

“We come from two completely different worlds and it's put everything into perspective,” said Voelker.

“Opportunities are not a one-size-fits-all,” Nelson said, with hopes that more people step up to become mentors this year. “We've all had someone who told us we could make it.”